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Living on the Hyphen: How Elizabeth Bowen Portrays the Predicament of the Anglo-Irish in *The Last September*

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Abstract

This paper explores the portrayal of the Anglo-Irish in Elizabeth Bowen's The Last September. Bowen writes from personal experience with a strong sense of irony to explore the relationships of this declining class and their relationship with their adopted homeland. As an inhabitant of an Anglo-Irish Big House, Bowen writes from the perspective of the Anglo-Irish but views their deteriorating existence with the clarity of one far more removed. Bowen's life mirrors that of the protagonist Lois, struggling with issues of identity and escape from an antiquated society. The essay notes the effects this lack of identity has on the characters in the novel and the Anglo-Irish class as a whole at the time it is set. Issues of detachment from land and heritage, lack of communication and relationships between characters, and the ignorance of a middle and upper social class, the Anglo-Irish, to understand their deterioration during the years of the Irish War of Independence are also explored.

Keywords: Anglo-Irish literature; Bowen, Elizabeth, 1899-1973; *The Last September*; Irish War of Independence

Living on the hyphen between Anglo and Irish; forever English in Ireland and Irish in England; this is the predicament of both the inhabitants of the Big House in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* and the position Bowen held in her own life. Through the portrayal of her own social class in a novel that closely represents her own upbringing, one can recognize themes of detachment, naivety and increasing irrelevance. Through a number of techniques, Bowen deploys a sense of irony in her treatment of many of the issues and characters explored in the novel, while providing a close account of life in 1920s Ireland through the eyes of a young girl behind the walls of the Anglo-Irish Big House. In doing so, Bowen illustrates a clear picture of life as a member of her social class while seemingly maintaining a strong sense of distance and detachment. The Ireland Bowen illustrates throughout the course of the novel is a far cry from the common view of rural Ireland during the War of Independence; instead, it is a unique firsthand account of a declining class on a blinkered journey to extinction. In his book *Inventing Ireland*, Declan Kiberd states "what gives *The Last September* much of its bittersweet poignancy is the innocence of the Anglo-

Irish as they go to meet their doom”.¹ Bowen’s sense of living on the hyphen is aligned with the theory that her work gives a sense of existing between the two countries. It is, according to Professor Neil Corcoran “most at home in the middle of the Irish sea”.² The fragmentation and dislocation of identity is a predominant theme in the novel and is illustrated predominately through the actions, thoughts and decisions of the novel’s protagonist, Lois Farquar. Lois is confined to a life she finds unsatisfying, while trying to form an identity in an atmosphere of delusion and detachment.

Just as Lois was born into a privileged and comfortable life, so too Elizabeth Bowen spent much of her childhood sheltered from an Ireland of poverty and struggle, at the family estate in County Cork. In 1907 she and her mother moved to England, where she attended Downe House School, a newly opened boarding school for girls. According to Maud Ellman, “Downe House taught Bowen how not to write – a lesson she often chose to ignore – and how not to exhibit feelings – a lesson she usually chose to obey”.³ Following the death of her mother in 1912, Bowen was raised by her aunts, as her father suffered from mental illness. Upon his death Bowen inherited the family estate in Cork. Much like the character of Lois in *The Last September*, Bowen found herself unsure of her own identity or where she belonged in the world. To overcome her dislocation from society Bowen adopted impeccable manners and decorum constructing herself as more English than the English themselves. The novel’s protagonist, Lois, also escapes into a world of etiquette and manners. The construction and disintegration of Lois’ identity and her dislocation from the world around her makes her a product, and in many ways a victim, of the novel’s Big House, Danielstown. While not entirely autobiographical perhaps, the character of Lois still reflects aspects of the identity struggles Bowen herself would have encountered, especially in terms of her life as a young, independently spirited, upper-class woman in a transitional Ireland of the 1910-20s.

The position of women in society was in a state of evolution in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the 1920s in Ireland and England, the emphasis of the women’s movement was on the need for education, increased employment opportunities and the recognition of women’s work. These particular issues did not immediately affect women of the Anglo-Irish class but the recognition of women as equal members of society was greatly important to their development. In conversation with Marda Norton, a visitor to Danielstown, Lois states “I hate women. But I can’t think how to begin to be anything else”.⁴ Here Bowen illustrates Lois’s frustration with life at Danielstown and her limited options in general as a woman in a repressive Irish society. Lois’ aunt, Lady Naylor, references the change in women’s attitudes in conversation with Mrs Trent, a fellow Big House owner, regarding Lois’s reaction to a traumatic event: “She did not take it as hard as I feared, girls of her generation seem less sensitive really [...]”.⁵ Women of Lois’s generation became less sensitive in response to the monumental changes the Great War had brought upon them. In the World War One years, many women went to work and began to see opportunities outside the home. Post war, many were left widowed or unmarried and so remained in the workplace. In the novel, Lois’s options as an upper-class woman of the Anglo-Irish set remain limited, however, and her inability to make a firm decision on her future inhibits her further, but the spark of interest for a more fulfilling and less restricted existence plays a major role in her dissatisfaction with society life.

¹ Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1995), 366.

² Neil Corcoran, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 12.

³ Maud Ellman, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 30.

⁴ Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September* (London: Vintage, 2011), 99.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 205.

While Lois is, in many ways, privileged in her position as a member of the Anglo-Irish class and a resident at Danielstown, in *The Last September*, Bowen illustrates the ways in which the comfort of life in the Big House becomes overshadowed by its impending demise and the blissful ignorance of its occupants. Bowen was aware that life in the Big House had become outdated and something of an antiquated society. As a privileged minority, the Anglo-Irish actively ignore the events outside the confines of their sheltered existences. Bowen approaches this refusal to acknowledge with a strong sense of irony. The Naylor's play down or actively ignore events outside the walls of the Big House and concern themselves with trivial ideas and events. Lady Naylor states "From all the talk, you might think almost anything was going to happen, but we never listen".⁶ The characters in the novel are portrayed with ironic detachment from the world. Lois's uncle, Lord Naylor, states "we never listen as though it is a virtue"⁷, he laughs at the idea of being in any danger and describes the army as an inconvenience to him; "the Army isn't at all what it used to be. I was held up yesterday for I wouldn't like to say how long, driving over to Ballyhinch, by a thing like a coffee-pot backing in and out of a gate."⁸ Lord Naylor is referring to the British Army in Ireland who are there to protect members of his class, while hunting down Irish rebel insurgents during the War of Independence. As the novel progresses, various views on the British Army's presence are presented. By the end of the novel, Mrs Vermont, the wife of a British officer at the army base in Clonmore, questions "Why can't we all go home? Why did we stay here? Why don't we all go home? That's what I can't understand".⁹ Here Bowen shows that the soldiers and their families are just as unsure of their position. The military families are yet another disjointed faction in the novel that adds to the unrest on the changing landscape of Ireland.

The novel begins with a sense of excitement and anticipation at the arrival of the Montmorencys, an event which Lois describes as "a moment of happiness, of perfection".¹⁰ The Montmorencys, Hugo and Francie, are long time family friends of the Naylor's. Their lives together, as described in Chapter Two of the novel, seem disjointed, uncertain and unconventional. Having lost a permanent home due to a failed emigration attempt to Canada and travelling regularly, both together and apart, the Montmorencys represent the themes of uncertain identity and displacement in the novel. Their conversation with the Naylor's on their arrival sets the conversational style in the Big House, as they wave and exclaim upon landing, but they do not listen and the conversation remains ambivalent. "Two toppling waves of excitement crashed and mingled; for moments everybody was inaudible".¹¹ Lois seems disheartened by her first interaction with Frances Montmorency, after what seems to be a much anticipated arrival; Frances merely references how dusty she is from the drive. These feeble exchanges between characters, according to Declan Kiberd, illustrate a "society in which true expression of feeling is inadmissible".¹² Kiberd deduces that this inability to express emotion comes from the refusal to admit any guilt or wrong doing in the acquisition of their privileged positions and suggests that Bowen herself believed that the position of the Anglo-Irish was not justified.

While she may not have found her position as owner of the Big House justified, Bowen poured all of her earnings into the sustainment of the estate. As the first woman to

⁶ Ibid., 26.

⁷ Ibid., 72.

⁸ Ibid., 26.

⁹ Ibid., 199.

¹⁰ Ibid., 7.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, 372.

inherit the house, Bowen worked tirelessly to keep the house in good repair. In contrast to the character of Lois who flees Danielstown before its eventual demise, Bowen seems to have felt a great level of connection and responsibility to her own Anglo-Irish estate. Bowen's actions in her own life and her continued connection to her social class and its property make her ironic treatment of the characters in the novel even more intriguing. Bowen's ironic commentary is conveyed through her use of free indirect discourse with perspectives changing over the course of a single conversation. In Chapter Nine of *The Last September*, Lois and her friend, Livvy, visit the house of Mrs Fogarty at the army base in Clonmore. Narrative shifts from the perspective of Livvy to Lois, their thoughts and the thoughts and exclamations of those around them, all told in the third person. "Lois blushed and let Livvy squeeze her hand. They both wondered: 'How should I feel under the circumstances?' The subalterns round all looked dogged, clasping their knees, and thought of what one would do for a woman. There was a stagger of emotional clapping. Then Mrs Vermont cried they were too ridiculous [...]"¹³ Here the narrative moves and changes perspectives; the use of this technique adds to the sense of irony, creating ambiguity between impersonation and identification of the characters. The reader does not connect with the characters in the same way that the characters do not connect with each other or to their surroundings. Mrs Fogarty's views of the British soldiers in Ireland are in stark contrast to her countrymen, who fought to remove the British army and gain a fully independent Irish Republic: "she did not know how she would have lived at all without the military at Clonmore".¹⁴ On their way home from Clonmore, Livvy and Lois hide from the Black and Tans, a name given to the auxiliary British army deployed in Ireland to try and combat the IRA's war of independence. During this tense wait, Lois recalls how she had "cried for a whole afternoon before the war because she was not someone in a historical novel".¹⁵ In her book on new critical perspectives on Bowen, Susan Osbourn compares Lois to a "failed Femme Fatale. She craves love, excitement, but in the end is content simply to be part of a pattern".¹⁶ Lois does not trust her own feelings and her central preoccupation is to escape from the Big House, but she is unsure of her identity or what role she would play in the world. Lois' sheltered existence, and Bowen's own detachment from Irish Nationalist politics, limits the insight into the political situation in the community around Danielstown. According to George Hughes, in his article on the problem of the Anglo-Irish expatriate, "Anglo-Irish writing in the twentieth century is strongly coloured by a personal sense of estrangement from many of the political currents of modern Ireland".¹⁷ Similarly, Bowen's account of life in rural Ireland is ambivalent to nationalist politics and does not side with the English or even Anglo-Irish position. The Anglo-Irish continually refer to themselves as Irish while the position of the English soldiers is continually questioned.

In his book on *The Transformation of Ireland from 1900-2000*, Diarmaid Ferriter notes that, "Realities of rural life and communities, in the midst of such pastoral beauty, were riddled with class tensions and difficulties. These were to be either suppressed or ignored".¹⁸ Interestingly, in that context, throughout *The Last September*, the reader can see how ignorance is either willed or deliberate depending on the character. Lady Naylor herself admits that she makes a point of not noticing while her nephew Laurence longs for "some

¹³ Bowen, *The Last September*, 73.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 72.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁶ Susan Osbourn, *Elizabeth Bowen : New Critical Perspectives* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2009), 103.

¹⁷ George Hughes, "The Problem of the Anglo-Irish Expatriate: Elizabeth Bowen and Louis MacNeice," *The Harp* 9 (1994), 59.

¹⁸ Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation Of Ireland 1900-2000* (London: Profile Books, 2005), 192.

crude intrusion of the actual”.¹⁹ Both Lois and Laurence are orphans at Danielstown and also hold the unusual position of having interacted with the Irish rebels in the local community. Lois has a chance meeting with a member of the IRA at a ruined mill while Laurence is caught up in an IRA ambush. One of the difficulties of relationships between the Anglo-Irish and the native Irish is that the Anglo-Irish were confined by their privileges. Bowen believed that “the structure of the Anglo-Irish society was raised over a country in Martyrdom” and “It enjoyed power without taking responsibility for the wider countryside over which it ruled”.²⁰ According to Neil Corcoran, Laurence is “Bowen’s wry portrait of the 1920s undergraduate – bookish, a bit camp, cynical with all the “wrong” politics”.²¹ Lois tells the Montmorencys that Laurence’s politics are not allowed at Danielstown as “the ones he brings over from Oxford are all wrong”.²² Laurence’s “incorrect” political position is that he understands and sympathises with the aims of the IRA. Laurence is not a permanent resident in the house and holds no great affection for it, and yet, or maybe because of that fact, he feels it is a place where he is free to express his “all wrong” views in a number of conversations with other inhabitants of the house. During a tennis match at the house, Laurence expresses to Hugo Montmorency that he would “like to be here when this house burns” and how they (the Anglo-Irish) “shall all be careful not to notice”.²³ Mr Montmorency is appalled by this statement and “felt more than ever his isolation, his homelessness”.²⁴ Both Lois and Laurence feel out of place at Danielstown, desperate for interaction with the world outside, while being confined by extenuating circumstances.

Laurence, although he is a family member, is still seen as a visiting guest, thus underlining the character’s dislocation in the novel, while Lois has recently finished her schooling and finds she is unable to make a decision on what she would like to do with her life. Her options, as discussed in the novel, include marriage, travel or further education. While Lois is in the privileged position of having travel and study to consider, she is not satisfied with these options. It is not just her life’s pursuits that are an issue for Lois, but questioning the purpose of her life reveals a deeper sense of dissatisfaction. Lois’s feelings of confinement and discontent were a common and ever increasing issue for women across all social classes at the turn of the century. The women’s movement fought for universal suffrage and equal opportunities in the workplace, issues that did not have an impact on Lois’ options, but rather distanced her further from the developing world outside the walls of Danielstown. Work outside of the home was not a consideration for women like Lois, (or Bowen), and she remained distant from the politics of the time. As for marriage, in his 1884 work *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Friedrich Engels stated his views of the Bourgeois marriage: “This marriage of convenience turns often enough into the crassest prostitution - sometimes of both partners, but far more commonly of the woman, who only differs from the ordinary courtesan in that she does not let out her body on piece-work as a wage-worker, but sells it once and for all into slavery”.²⁵ Lois considers marriage to an English soldier but eventually decides to travel to France to improve her French. Her chosen option means she can leave Danielstown and pursue a life outside the physical confinements of the Big House, however, her lack of conviction in her decision, or ability to form her true identity, leave her still under the control of her social class.

¹⁹ Bowen, *The Last September*, 44.

²⁰ Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, 365.

²¹ Corcoran, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return*, 47.

²² Bowen, *The Last September*, 21.

²³ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, n.d., II,4, <http://readingfromtheleft.com/PDF/EngelsOrigin.pdf>.

Lois and Laurence's displacement at Danielstown mirrors the displacement of the Anglo-Irish in Ireland at that time. The Wyndham Act of 1903 subsidised Irish tenants to buy out their landlords; in the ensuing 13 years the percentage of land owned by British landlords decreased from 97% to 30%.²⁶ Despite the reclamation of land, the Big House remained a concrete reminder of the comparative wealth of the families and the past repression inflicted on the local communities. Continually throughout the novel, the Naylor and various other Anglo-Irish characters refer to themselves as Irish, or at least not English. While their attitudes and behaviour are more akin to that of the English, they believe that they are inherently Irish. Arguably, this naive identification is ultimately one of the main conditions that leads to their demise. Bowen herself faced very similar issues with identity in her writing. According to George Hughes, "Anglo-Irish writers were people who have never shared the Irish national memory, and are therefore just as unIrish as it is possible for them to be".²⁷ Despite these views, her observations and her allegiance to the British royal family, Bowen continued to consider herself an Irish writer and the Anglo-Irish held on to their conceived identity, within their own society at least. The decline of established identities is a central theme in the novel. For example, members of the Anglo-Irish class are unsure of their identity and their collective future, the role of women is changing and evolving, and the newly emerging Irish Republic has yet to fully form its own national identity and culture, both socially and politically. Bowen's own distance from historical events in Ireland, particularly the War of Independence, coupled with her personal attachment to her own Big House at Bowen's Court, gives a retrospective view of the final years of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy. The novel is set in September 1920 and condenses the period of Anglo-Irish decay, but the reality of the decline of the Anglo-Irish in Ireland took place over a number of years.

The politics of rural Ireland in the early 1900s was dominated by the land question and the Irish fight for independence. Yet this constant conflict and change of the political landscape of the country is minimally evident in *The Last September*. Apart from the meeting of Lois and the IRA member hidden in the abandoned mill, all conflict and nationalist activity is outside the realm of the Naylor and their guests. Laurence illustrates his abstract view of the war in a conversation he has with an English soldier, Gerald Lesworth. Asking Gerald's "point of view" on the war, the conversation quickly moves to civilisation in general. This conversation demonstrates the lack of connection between characters and the strange detachment many of the Anglo-Irish characters have from the war. Bowen herself remained distant from the conflict, away at school for the 1916 Rising and, as Kiberd states, "she had been so sheltered that she had no idea that Protestants did not make up the majority religion in Ireland".²⁸ The distance the characters in the novel wish to have is evident when any mention of the war occurs. At the beginning of the novel the Naylor laugh off the Montmorency's concern of nationalist activity in the area; at their first dinner of the visit Mrs Montmorency enquires, "are you sure we will not be shot at if we sit out late on the steps?".²⁹ She goes on to mention the fact that they were advised not to travel to "that end of the country" at all, but is then easily distracted by talk of Lois dancing with the soldiers. When news is brought to them of an incident in which two Black and Tan soldiers may have been killed, they instantly revert to talking about the trivial matter of Marda Norton's tennis shoes. The postman delivers the news which is barely acknowledged, somewhat discounted and then passed over. Marda Norton, a new arrival at the house, enquires how he has heard of the

²⁶ Ferriter, *The Transformation Of Ireland 1900-2000*, 192.

²⁷ Hughes, "The Problem of the Anglo-Irish Expatriate: Elizabeth Bowen and Louis MacNeice," 59.

²⁸ Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation*, 365.

²⁹ Bowen, *The Last September*, 23.

events, to which the postman replies: “How would one help from hearing? Though it was not for him to say what was true and what was what you would hear”.³⁰ With this response, Lois, Marda and Sir Richard continue on as normal with no further conversation on the event. Chapter titles in the novel often are suggestive of arrivals, visits and departures signalling a plot of transitions and instabilities. There are no concrete relationships between people themselves, or between people to their surroundings. For example, Marda develops a relationship with Hugo Montmorency but leaves suddenly before anything develops between the pair. Lois’ relationship with Gerald Lesworth is similar in that Lois is continually unsure of her feelings for Lesworth; this inability to connect emotionally is a common trait of the Anglo-Irish characters in the novel. Lois is not only unable to connect with Gerald, but with either side of her heritage. It is almost as if her acceptance of Gerald’s affection would be a choice to live on one side of the hyphen. At a point when Lois has almost decided to move forward with Gerald, Lady Naylor interferes and objects to the relationship. Tradition and her position again prevent Lois from escaping from her current situation.

The loss of her mother, Laura, at a young age and the continual references to Laura throughout the novel also play a part in Lois’s inability to construct an identity for herself. Laura is depicted as quite brilliant and a “success” in England. Hugo Montmorency who had been in love with Laura describes her as detached and remote: “I don’t believe things ever really mattered to Laura. Nothing got close to her: she was very remote”.³¹ Laura’s seemingly distant personality provides a further obstacle to Lois: on a number of occasions in their conversation about Laura, the Montmorencys’ reference Lois being away at school, giving the impression that, even before her death, Lois and Laura had not enjoyed a strong maternal bond. When she overhears Lady Naylor and Frances Montmorency speaking about her, at the point when Frances is about to reveal what she thinks of Lois, Lois makes a loud noise to avoid hearing Mrs Montmorency’s opinion. If Lois was to hear a definition of herself, she would be less free to create her own identity outside the constraints of Danielstown. When questioned by Marda as to why she has stayed in Danielstown in this unhappy state, Lois replies: “I like to be in a pattern [...]. I like to be related, to have to be what I am. Just to be is so intransitive, so lonely”.³² The loss of her mother, acceptance of traditional manners and behaviour, and her emotional removal from the present leave Lois lacking the personality traits she needs to make her own way in the world. Lois’ personality is not the only one lacking in strength, as the detachment of the Naylor family from their community and the belief that they are accepted in their current position, leave them in a state of limbo between the old world and their impending doom.

Early in the novel, at a dinner party with the Montmorencys, Bowen describes the party as transitory, enisled and distant while the portraits above them of former residents of Danielstown are given “every vestige of personality”.³³ This comparison between the redundant, outdated, idle position of the Anglo-Irish and the former glory portrayed above them of a time in which they wish to remain, is a signal of Bowen’s acceptance of the antiquated nature of life in the Big House. The Naylor family remain unaware to the last that their standing is on the verge of being demolished, the war is ignored and they maintain this life of style and order, long after their position has disappeared. Outside the walls of Danielstown, those fighting for the establishment of an Irish Republic viewed landlords as oppressive, alien and the houses themselves as concrete structures representing the wealth and dominance of English colonisation. Between 1919 and 1923, 275 country mansions of the Anglo-Irish

³⁰ Ibid., 79.

³¹ Ibid., 19.

³² Ibid., 98.

³³ Ibid., 24.

landed class were burned down. Historian John Dorney states “The logic behind the burnings was clear; the old ascendancy class were the backbone of the British presence in Ireland, destroying their palatial seats also hurt the British State [...] while undermining the deference some still felt for the old landed families”.³⁴ In *The Last September*, Bowen illustrates the way in which the failure to acknowledge or understand this logic lead to the downfall of the Naylor’s and, on a wider historical scale, the entire Anglo-Irish class and system. Because Bowen places the house as a central character in the novel, it allows her to create the idea that the characters are both protected and inhibited by the house. They are shaped by many aspects of the estate, and established traditions (particularly concerning the role of women) confine their actions, as fellow inhabitants enforce the power of the past. For Lois, for example, her aunt plays a strong role in keeping her in line with tradition while they continue to live by an illusion of style, old world charm and etiquette. In the end, however, Lois and Laurence and the guests leave Danielstown, Lesworth is shot and killed in an IRA ambush, and the Naylor’s are left to watch Danielstown burn. Their willful ignorance of the political climate ultimately leaves them powerless, homeless and void of any identity.

It seems unlikely that Bowen would be so unsympathetic to the rapid decline of a situation so closely linked to her own life; the lack of sympathy, however, is coupled with a lack of insight into the forces closing in and evicting them. According to George Hughes, the view of the Anglo-Irish writer cannot be “based on the experience of the majority of Irish people. It is always a partial view, and the experience of expatriation shapes it even more firmly in its limitations”.³⁵ A lack of connection to one’s homeland is a major element in the issues of identity and detachment. While Bowen remained dedicated to the upkeep of Bowen’s Court, for many years her allegiance remained with Britain. She finds her own identity in her writing and by doing so seemingly forges at least some sort of a connection to her Anglo-Irish heritage through her writing. The novel represents her struggle to fully understand her position between two countries and classes on a constantly changing political landscape. The irony Bowen utilises in her treatment of the characters allows her to maintain a distance from the elements of her heritage that she may not be comfortable with or fully understand and to explore issues of her own life with a sense of detachment and clarity.

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³⁴ John Dorney, “The Big House and the Irish Revolution,” *The Irish Story*, June 21, 2011, <http://www.theirishstory.com/2011/06/21/the-big-house-and-the-irish-revolution/#.Upeo4LmYbug>.

³⁵ Hughes, “The Problem of the Anglo-Irish Expatriate: Elizabeth Bowen and Louis MacNeice,” 63.

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